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GANGS GO HIGH TECH BY USING LASER GUN SIGHTS

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CHICAGO TRIBUNE

APRIL 8, 1996

There was a time not long ago when police counted on a gun-toting gang member's poor aim for survival.

Gang members also used their Uzis and their Tec-9s to spray houses with gunfire in drive-by shootings, sometimes hitting nothing but the night air.

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But criminals, who five years ago thought a gun--any gun--would do, are starting to get choosy. They're starting to get resourceful. As one Chicago police officer put it, they're starting to think.

They realize they can use highly sophisticated devices to beef up their arsenals and improve their aim. So it's not surprising that police are on the lookout for one of the latest additions to the criminal arsenal: a laser sight that attaches to a gun and can turn a novice into a marksman.

While the fancy electronic sights help law-enforcement officials improve their aim in target practice, they can become lethal in the hands of others.

"This increases the accuracy of the unpracticed person," said Master Sgt. Marc Maton of the Elgin-based North Central Narcotics Task Force, which confiscated a laser-sighted handgun in a Kane County drug raid as early as 1991.

Chicago police Sgt. Jim Gainer said very few laser-sighted handguns have passed through the crime laboratory since the electronic sights were first advertised about five years ago, but suburban police say it is not that unusual for the laser sights to be found on guns.

North Chicago police found a powerful laser-sighted handgun among the weapons and drugs seized recently in a raid at 1016 McAlister Ave. The laser sight, which was attached to a \$1,500 .50-caliber Desert Eagle semiautomatic handgun, was the first one confiscated by the department, said Gerald Pedrin, assistant police chief.

Police said a gang member got the laser-equipped weapon from another man who used his firearms owner ID card to legally buy the sight at a Waukegan gun store.

Laser sights cost about \$200 in Chicago-area gun stores and can be mounted on most any gun.

The 2-inch-long and 1-inch-high electronic sight looks like a tiny flashlight and is usually attached underneath or on top of the gun barrel with screws, Pedrin said.

A red dot from the laser is visible 20 yards away during the day and hundreds of yards at night. The red beam of light from the gun to the target can be seen only in smoky air, said Phillip Scheible, director of government contracts for U.S. Cavalry, a quarterly catalog featuring tactical and camping equipment. The beam of light is harmful only if it is aimed at the eye, he said.

Criminals aren't the only ones putting laser-equipped handguns to use.

At least four Aurora police officers carry them in an effort to improve their aim. Their chief gave the department permission to use laser sights six months ago.

"It's experimental," said Aurora Lt. Mike Gilloffo. "Not too many officers have them because they have to buy them on their own."

The officers attached the laser sights to their Glocks and Berettas but have yet to find themselves in a situation where they might be used.

While some Aurora officers are attracted to the technology, the Chicago Police Department won't be experimenting with laser sights any time soon, said Sgt. Frank Cascio of the research and development unit.

"We just don't feel they are necessary," he said. "Drawing a weapon and aiming it at a suspect's chest in a shootout is enough of a scare factor."

Besides, Cascio said, a suspect 5 feet from an officer could run away in the time it takes to turn the laser on and point.

"It slows you down," he said. "You can bet that in a shootout the last thing I'm going to be thinking about is where to aim the little dot."

Maton said even a few seconds is too much time wasted on aiming the red dot.

"Generally, it's just point, pull and pray," he said.

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